

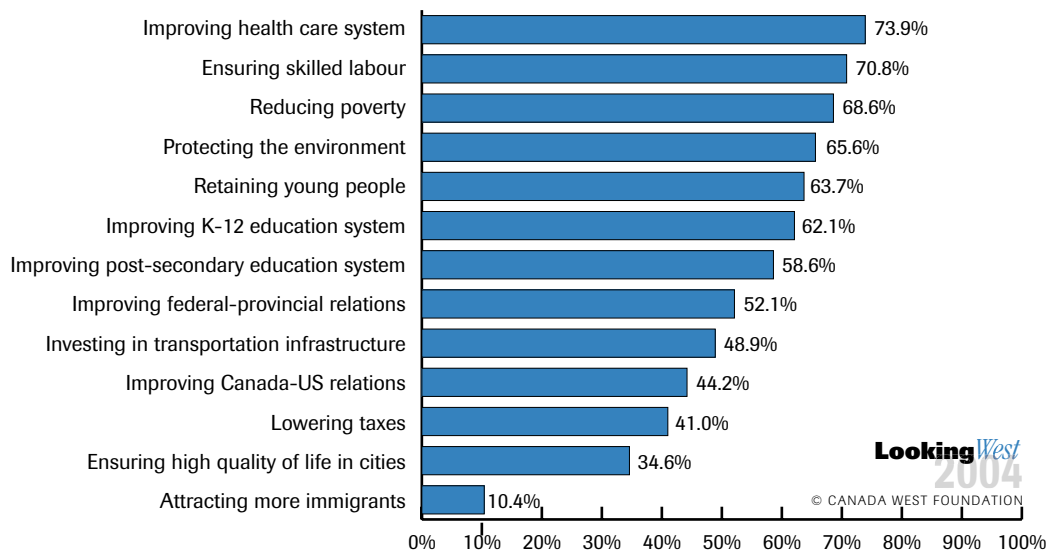


# Policy Priorities

The Looking West 2004 survey asked respondents, "Thinking about what governments can do to ensure the future prosperity and quality of life in [province], would you rate the priority of the following as a high priority, a medium priority, a low priority, or not a priority?" Thirteen policy fields were explored: lowering taxes; improving [province]'s health care system; improving [province]'s Kindergarten – Grade 12 education system; improving [province]'s post-secondary education system, which includes universities, colleges, technical schools and trades training; investing in [province]'s transportation infrastructure, such as roads, railways, airports and urban transportation systems ("ports" were added for BC respondents); attracting more immigrants to [province]; protecting the environment; retaining [province]'s young people; reducing poverty; improving Canada-US relations; improving the relationship between [province] and the federal government; ensuring [province] has the skilled labour it needs for the years ahead; and ensuring a high quality of life in [province]'s large cities." (Question order was rotated by Western Opinion Research to avoid biases related to placement in the list.)

It must be stressed that there is no presumption that only the 13 policy fields probed are of importance to western Canada. However, the issues included provide an interesting snapshot of the variety of issues that are seen as important to western Canadian life – and of the issues that are seen to be of lesser importance. One caveat in reading the data: respondents were not asked to rank the 13 against each other, but rather to rate each individual policy area as a high priority, a medium priority, a low priority, or not a priority. The policy issues are then ranked in the analysis stage based on the percentage of respondents indicating a policy area is a high priority.

Figure 1: Policy Area is a "High Priority," 2004 - Western Canada



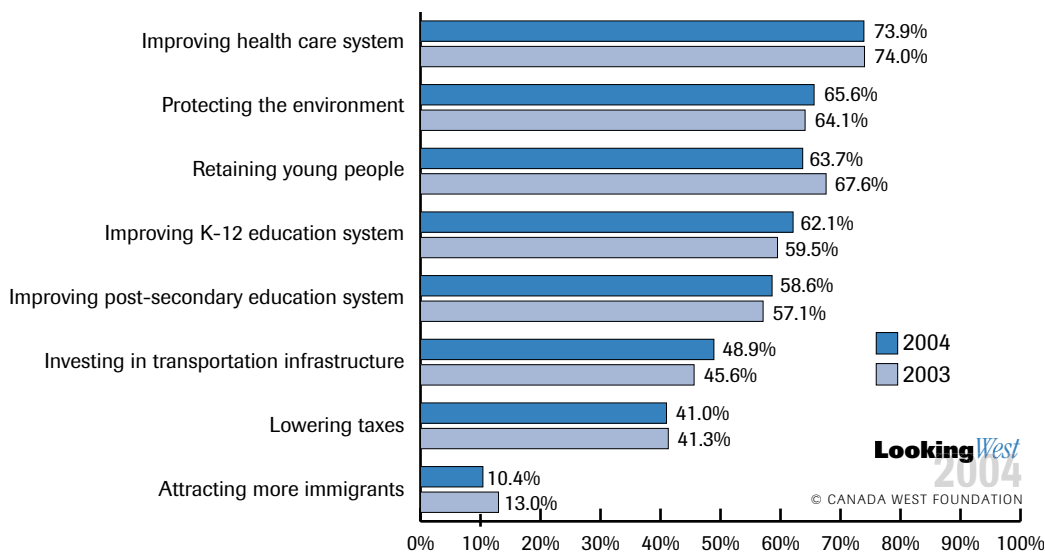
Thinking about what governments can do to ensure the future prosperity and quality of life in [province], would you rate the priority of the following as a high priority, a medium priority, a low priority, or not a priority?

Health care is a leading policy topic in political discussions, public debates and in the media, and it is no surprise that improving the health care system is a top priority for western Canadians. Almost three-quarters of western Canadians state that improving the health care system is a high priority. However, while health care is a top priority, it is not the only policy issue that western Canadians see as important. Looking at the West as a whole, there are a number of findings that are of particular interest:

- Lowering taxes does not make it into the top ten priorities.
- Ensuring skilled labour is clearly a high priority across the West, but there is less support for some of the steps that might be taken to address labour supply. While western Canadians see retaining young people as a top strategy, there is less support for improving the post-secondary education system, and very few western Canadians see attracting more immigrants as a high priority.
- Almost two-thirds of western Canadians state that reducing poverty is a high priority, an interesting finding given that the Looking West 2003 survey found that less than one third of western Canadians felt that increasing funding for social services was a high priority.
- Neither improving the province’s Kindergarten–Grade 12 education system or improving [province]’s post-secondary education system are in the top five priorities.
- While there have been growing political and business concerns about improving Canada-US relations, a greater number of western Canadians feel that improving federal-provincial relations is a high priority to future prosperity and quality of life.
- Despite ongoing debates about the importance of large cities to provincial economies and quality of life, urban issues appear to remain somewhat on the policy backburner, as only one-third of western Canadians state ensuring a high quality of life in the large cities is a high priority.
- Almost two-thirds of western Canadians rank “protecting the environment” as a high priority.

Eight of the thirteen policy areas – health care, environment, young people, K-12 education, post-secondary education, transportation infrastructure, lowering taxes, and immigration – were included in the Looking West 2003 survey. The stability between the 2003 and 2004 figures is remarkable. The largest shifts are only in the magnitude of three to four percentage points. Such modest shifts in opinion across two separate surveys a full year apart indicate that western Canadians are consistent in their policy priorities.

Figure 2: Policy Area is a "High Priority," 2003 and 2004 - Western Canada



Thinking about what governments can do to ensure the future prosperity and quality of life in [province], would you rate the priority of the following as a high priority, a medium priority, a low priority, or not a priority?

Figure 3: High Priority by Province 2004

<b>BC</b>		<b>AB</b>	
Improving health care system	76.3%	Improving health care system	70.5%
Ensuring skilled labour	72.0%	Ensuring skilled labour	69.7%
Reducing poverty	70.0%	Protecting the environment	67.4%
Protecting the environment	65.5%	Improving K-12 education system	67.0%
Improving K-12 education system	63.9%	Reducing poverty	66.9%
Retaining young people	61.1%	Improving post-secondary education system	61.6%
Improving post-secondary education system	59.2%	Retaining young people	58.4%
Improving federal-provincial relations	52.2%	Improving federal-provincial relations	52.7%
Investing in transportation infrastructure	50.7%	Improving Canada-US relations	49.7%
Lowering taxes	39.9%	Lowering taxes	40.9%
Improving Canada-US relations	39.3%	Investing in transportation infrastructure	40.3%
Ensuring high quality of life in cities	34.4%	Ensuring high quality of life in cities	34.0%
Attracting more immigrants	8.5%	Attracting more immigrants	8.3%

<b>SK</b>		<b>MB</b>	
Retaining young people	79.5%	Improving health care system	75.8%
Ensuring skilled labour	72.6%	Retaining young people	73.6%
Improving health care system	71.7%	Reducing poverty	70.3%
Reducing poverty	66.2%	Ensuring skilled labour	67.9%
Protecting the environment	63.8%	Protecting the environment	62.9%
Investing in transportation infrastructure	58.1%	Investing in transportation infrastructure	56.7%
Improving federal-provincial relations	57.5%	Improving post-secondary education system	53.4%
Improving post-secondary education system	53.1%	Improving K-12 education system	51.8%
Improving K-12 education system	51.0%	Improving federal-provincial relations	45.3%
Improving Canada-US relations	47.8%	Improving Canada-US relations	44.4%
Lowering taxes	43.8%	Lowering taxes	42.6%
Ensuring high quality of life in cities	31.6%	Ensuring high quality of life in cities	39.3%
Attracting more immigrants	17.1%	Attracting more immigrants	17.3%

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Thinking about what governments can do to ensure the future prosperity and quality of life in [province], would you rate the priority of the following as a high priority, a medium priority, a low priority, or not a priority?

Looking at specific provinces, some differences do emerge. Saskatchewan stands out as the only province in which improving health care is not in the first position – both retaining young people and ensuring sufficient skilled labour have higher percentages of respondents rating them as high priorities. However, the actual percentage of respondents rating health care as a high priority in Saskatchewan is similar to that of the other three provinces. Saskatchewan and Manitoba stand apart from BC and Alberta due to the high percentage of respondents stating that retaining the province’s young people is a high priority.

That said, there is considerable consistency in the relative positioning of the different policy areas. In all four provinces, health care, skilled labour, poverty and the environment are among the top five priorities. In all four provinces, immigration, urban quality of life, lowering taxes, and Canada-US relations are among the bottom five priorities. And, in all four provinces, K-12 education, post-secondary education, infrastructure and federal-provincial relations are among the middle ranking priorities. As was found in the Looking West 2003 survey, despite the many political, policy and economic differences between the four western provinces, in terms of policy priorities western Canadians are more similar than they are different.

The full responses for each policy area are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Policy Priorities 2004 - Western Canada

	<i>high</i>	<i>med.</i>	<i>low</i>	<i>not a priority</i>
Improving the health care system	73.9%	20.1%	4.5%	1.4%
Ensuring skilled labour	70.8%	23.0%	4.6%	1.1%
Reducing poverty	68.6%	23.1%	6.2%	1.6%
Protecting the environment	65.6%	27.6%	5.8%	0.8%
Retaining young people	63.7%	24.8%	8.2%	1.7%
Improving K-12 education system	62.1%	27.7%	7.1%	2.0%
Improving post-secondary education system	58.6%	31.7%	7.6%	1.4%
Improving federal-provincial relations	52.1%	37.0%	8.3%	2.1%
Investing in transportation infrastructure	48.9%	41.5%	8.3%	1.4%
Improving Canada-US relations	44.2%	34.8%	15.9%	4.5%
Lowering taxes	41.0%	37.4%	16.5%	4.8%
Ensuring high quality of life in cities	34.6%	44.5%	15.2%	4.3%
Attracting more immigrants	10.4%	34.8%	41.2%	12.7%

*NOTE: Due to non-responses, numbers may not total to 100.*

Thinking about what governments can do to ensure the future prosperity and quality of life in [province], would you rate the priority of the following as a high priority, a medium priority, a low priority, or not a priority?

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